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The Adventures of
RAFFLES.
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RAFFLES, THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN

Tenth Adventure.

THE LAST LAUGH.

By E. W. HORNUNG.

AS I have had occasion to remark elsewhere, the pick of our exploits, from a frankly criminal point of view, are of least use for the comparatively pure purposes of these papers. They might be appreciated in a trade journal (if only that want could be supplied) by skilled manipulators of the jimmy and the large light bunch, but as records of unbroken yet insignificant success they would be found at once too trivial and too technical if not sordid and unprofitable into the bargain. The latter epithets and worse have indeed already been applied, if not to Raffles and all his works, at least to mine upon Raffles by more than one worthy wielder of a virtuous pen. I need not say how heartily I disagree with that truly pious opinion. So far from admitting a single word of it, I maintain it is the liveliest warning that I am giving to the world. Raffles was a genius, and he could not make it pay! Raffles had invention, resource, incomparable audacity and a nerve in ten thousand. He was both strategian and tactician, and we all now know the difference between the two. Yet for months he had been hiding like a rat in a hole, unable to show even his altered face by night or day without risk unless another risk were courted by three inches of conspicuous crape. Then thus far our rewards had oftener than not been no reward at all. Altogether it was a very different story from the old festive, unsuspected club and cricket days, with their noctes ambrosianae at the Albany.

And now, in addition to the eternal peril of recognition there was yet another menace of which I knew nothing. I thought no more of our Neapolitan organ-grinders, though I did often think of the moving page that they had torn for me out of my friend's strange life in Italy. Raffles never alluded to the subject again, and for my part I had entirely forgotten his wild ideas connecting the organ-grinders with the Camorra and imagining them upon his own tracks. I heard no more of it and thought as little, as I say.

Then one night in the autumn—I shrink from shocking the susceptible for nothing—but there was a certain house in Palace Gardens, and when we got there Raffles would pass on. I could see no soul in sight, no glimmer in the windows. But Raffles had my arm, and on we went without talking about it. Sharp to the left on the Notting Hill side, sharper still up Silver street, a little tacking west and south, a plunge across High street and presently we were home.

"Pajamas first," said Raffles with as much authority as though it mattered. It was a warm night, however, though September, and I did not mind till I came in clad as he commanded to find the autocrat himself still booted and capped. He was peeping through the blind and the gas was still turned down. But he said that I could turn it up as he helped himself to a cigarette and nothing with it.

"May I mix you one?" said I.

"No, thanks."

"What's the trouble?"

"We were followed."

"Never!"

"You never saw it."

"But you never looked round."

"I have an eye at the back of each ear, Bunny."

I helped myself and I fear with less moderation than might have been the case a minute before.

"So that was why"——

"That was why," said Raffles, nodding; but he did not smile and I put down my glass untouched.

"They were following us then!"

"All up Palace Gardens."

"I thought you wound about coming back over the hill."

"Nevertheless one of them's in the street below at this moment."

No, he was not fooling me. He was very grim. And he had not taken off a thing; perhaps he did not think it worth while.

"Plain clothes?" I sighed, following the sartorial train of thought even to the loathly arrows that had decorated my person once already for a little aeon. Next time they would give me double. The skilly was in my stomach when I saw Raffles's face.

"Who said it was the police, Bunny?" said he. "It's the Italians. They're only after me; they won't hurt a hair of your head, let alone cropping it! Have a drink and don't mind me. I shall score them off before I'm done."

"And I'll help you!"

"No, old chap, you won't. This is my own little show. I've known about it for weeks. I first tumbled to it the day those Neapolitans came back with their organs, though I didn't seriously suspect things then; they never came again, those two, they had done their part. That's the Camorra all over, from all accounts. The Count I told you about is pretty high up in it by the way he spoke, but there will be grades and grades between him and the organ-grinders. I shouldn't be surprised if he had every low-down Neapolitan ice-creamer in the town upon my tracks! The organization's incredible. Then do you remember the superior foreigner who came to the door a few days afterward? You said he had velvet eyes."

"I never connected him with those two!"

"Of course you didn't, Bunny, so you threatened to kick the fellow downstairs, and only made them keener on the scent. It was too late to say anything when you told me. But the very next time I showed my nose outside I heard a camera click as I passed, and the fiend was a person with velvet eyes. Then there was a lull. That happened weeks ago. They had sent me to Italy for identification by Count Corbucci."

"But this is all theory," I exclaimed. "How on earth can you know?"

"I don't know," said Raffles, "but I should like to bet. Our friend the bloodhound is hanging about the corner near the pillar box. Look through my window, it's dark in there, and tell me who he is."

The man was too far away for me to swear to his face, but he wore a covert coat of un-English length, and the lamp across the road played steadily on his boots. They were very yellow and they made no noise when he took a turn. I strained my eyes, and all at once I remembered the thin-soled, low-heeled, splay yellow boots of the insidious foreigner with the soft eyes and the brown-paper face whom I had turned from the door as a palpable fraud. The ring at the bell was the first I had heard of him, there had been no warning step upon the stairs and my suspicious eye had searched his feet for rubber soles.

"It's the fellow," I said, returning to Raffles, and I described his boots.

Raffles was delighted.

"Well done, Bunny; you're coming on," said he. "Now I wonder if he's been over here all the time or if they sent him over expressly? You did better than you think in spotting those boots, for they can only have been made in Italy, and that looks like the special envoy. But it's no use speculating. I must find out."

"How can you?"

"He won't stay there all night."

"Well?"

"When he gets tired of it I shall return the compliment and follow him."

"Not alone," said I firmly.

"Well, we'll see; we'll see at once" said Raffles, rising. "Out with the gas, Bunny, while I take a look. Thank you. Now wait a bit * * * yes! He's chucked it; he's off already, and so am I!"

But I slipped to our outer door and held the passage.

"I don't let you go alone, you know."

"You can't come with me in pajamas."

"Now I see why you made me put them on!"

"Bunny, if you don't shift I shall have to shift you. This is my very private one-man show. But I'll be back in an hour—there!"

"You swear?"

"By all my gods."

I gave in. How could I help giving in? He did not look the man that he had been, but you never knew with Raffles, and I could not have him lay a hand on me. I let him go with a shrug and my blessing, then ran into his room to see the last of him from the window.

The creature in the coat and boots had reached the end of our little street, where he appeared to have hesitated, so that Raffles was just in time to see which way he turned. And Raffles was after him at an easy pace, and had himself almost reached the corner when my attention was distracted from the alert nonchalance of his gait. I was marvelling that it alone had not long ago betrayed him, for nothing about him was so unconsciously characteristic when suddenly I realized that Raffles was not the only person in the little lonely street. Another pedestrian had entered from the other end a man heavily built and clad with an astrakhan collar to his coat on this warm night and a black slouch hat that hid his features from my bird's-eye view. His steps were the short and shuffling ones of a man advanced in years and in fatty degeneration, but of a sudden they stopped beneath my very eyes. I could have dropped a marble into the dented crown of the black felt hat. Then at the same moment Raffles turned the corner without looking round, and the big man below raised both his hands and his face. Of the latter I saw only the huge white mustache, like a flying gull, as Raffles had described it, for at a glance I divined that this was his arch-enemy, the Count Corbucci himself.

I did not stop to consider the subtleness of the system by which the real hunter lagged behind while his subordinate pointed the quarry like a sporting dog. I left the Count shuffling onward faster than before, and I jumped into some clothes as though the flats were on fire. If the Count was going to follow Raffles in his turn then I would follow the Count in mine, and there would be a midnight procession of us through the town. But I found no sign of him in the empty street and no sign in the Earl's Court road, that looked as empty for all its length save for a natural enemy standing like a waxwork with a glimmer at his belt.

"Officer," I gasped "have you seen anything of an old gentleman with a big white mustache?"

The unlicked cub of a common constable seemed to eye me the more suspiciously for the flattering form of my address.

"Took a hansom," said he at length.

A hansom! Then he was not following the others on foot: there was no guessing his game. But something must be said or done.

"He's a friend of mine," I explained, "and I want to overtake him. Did you hear where he told the fellow to drive?"

A curt negative was the policeman's reply to that, and if ever I take part in a night assault-at-arms, revolver versus baton in the back kitchen, I know which member of the Metropolitan Police Force I should like for my opponent.

If there was no overtaking the Count however, it should be a comparatively simple matter in the case of the couple on foot, and I wildly hailed the first hansom that crawled into my ken. I must tell Raffles who it was that I had seen. The Earl's Court road was long and the time since he vanished in it but a few short minutes. I drove down the length of that useful thoroughfare with an eye apiece on either pavement, sweeping each as with a brush, but never a Raffles came into the pan. Then I tried the Fulham road, first to the west, then to the east, and in the end drove home to the flat as bold as brass. I did not realize my indiscretion until I had paid the man and was on the stairs. Raffles never dreamed of driving all the way back, but I was hoping now to find him waiting up above. He had said an hour. I had remembered it suddenly. And now the hour was more than up. But the flat was as empty as I had left it. The very light that had encouraged me, pale though it was, as I turned the corner in my hansom, was but the light that I myself had left burning in the desolate passage.

I can give you no conception of the night that I spent. Most of it I hung across the sill, throwing a wide net with my ears, catching every footstep afar off, every hansom bell further still, only to gather in some alien whom I seldom even landed in our street. Then I would listen at the door. He might come over the roof, and eventually some one did, but now it was broad daylight, and I flung the door open in the milkman's face, which whitened at the shock as though I had ducked him in his own pail.

"You're late," I thundered as the first excuse for my excitement.

"Beg your pardon," said he indignantly, "but I'm half an hour before my usual time."

"Then I beg yours," said I, "but the fact is Mr. Maturin has had one of his bad nights, and I seem to have been waiting hours for milk to make him a cup of tea."

This little fib (ready enough for a Raffles, though I say it,) earned me not only forgiveness but that obliging sympathy which is a branch of the business of the man at the door. The good fellow said that he could see I had been sitting up all night, and he left me pluming myself upon the accidental art with which I had told my very necessary tarradiddle. On reflection I gave the credit to instinct, not accident, and then sighed afresh as I realized how the influence of the master was sinking into me, and he heaven knew where! But my punishment was swift to follow, for within the hour the bell rang imperiously twice, and there was Dr. Theobald on our mat in a yellow Jaeger suit, with a chin as yellow jutting over the flaps that he had turned up to hide his pajamas.

"What's this about a bad night?" said he.

"He couldn't sleep and he wouldn't let me," I whispered, never loosening my grasp on the door and